

News Items and Public Crime Summary for Week Ending May 28, 2011

Curacao – Speech Central Bank President Tromp Makes Headlines

Central Bank for Curacao & St. Maarten President Emsley Tromp addressed “The state of Curacao’s economy: Developments & Vulnerabilities” in a speech at a Curacao Businesses Association event last Friday.

Preliminary data indicate the Curacao economy grew an estimated 0.2% in 2010, compared to a contraction of 0.5% in 2009. Consumer price inflation accelerated to 2.8% in 2010, up from 1.6% in 2009. The anemic economic expansion was due mainly to an upturn in the wholesale & retail trade and financial services sectors and in the public sector. Activities in the wholesale & retail trade sector rose, matching gains in domestic spending and tourist spending. A 9-month shutdown in 2010 of the Venezuelan State-owned Oil Company PdVSA-operated Isla Refinery negatively influenced the Curacao economy. Also, activities in the ship repair industry shrank.

Another mounting risk is the widening deficit on the current account of our balance of payments. This deficit widened in 2010 compared to 2009, largely due to a decline in the net export of goods and services. The latter decline resulted from an increase in imports accompanied by a decline in exports. The growth in imports can be ascribed to increased international oil prices. In contrast, exports shrank as a result of a contraction in re-exports by the free-zone companies. This contraction in re-exports was related to, among other things, lower demand from Venezuela due to the devaluation of the Bolivar, and the tightened foreign exchange controls by the Venezuelan authorities.

The Kingdom debt relief program which was part of the Netherlands Antilles’ dissolution process allowed Curaçao and St. Maarten to start their new status as semi-autonomous entities within the Kingdom of the Netherlands with sound public finances and budgetary rules and procedures in place to keep their finances in check. The estimated debt-to-GDP ratio of Curaçao at the end of October 2010 was 35%, while that of St. Maarten was about 24%. These ratios can be categorized as sound according to international standards.

Tromp urges a vision of a national strategy that embraces current issues and stated that Curacao's young people are the greatest resource. Curacao can no longer expect the generosity of the Kingdom or the ingenuity and labor of the past generations to sustain growth. The people of Curacao must embrace the reality that comes with opportunities and challenges, and that to succeed as a semi-autonomous nation, requires a commitment and investment in the future. Vulnerabilities have restrained Curacao from achieving a higher level of sustainable economic growth and, hence, prosperity for all. Therefore, through strengthening of economic resilience based on policies aimed at a stable macroeconomic environment, efficient-functioning markets, and good governance, Curacao will be able to break with the past and provide a new status with a bright future. (Various media)

Kingdom – Dutch Minister Donner: Kingdom Dissolution Is Looming

The last step in the continuous Dutch Kingdom dissolution process could be complete independence for Aruba, Curaçao and St. Maarten if things progress the way they are

now, according to Dutch Minister of Home Affairs and Kingdom Relations Piet Hein Donner. Donner made his remarks at an event in the Netherlands which explained that the process of continuous dissolution actually started in 1948. The Round Table Conference in that year kicked off a process that led to Suriname's independence and a semi-autonomous status for Aruba.

The dismantling of the Netherlands Antilles in October last year is just another step in the continuous dissolution process. Only one step remains: the dissolution of the Kingdom ties and the complete independence of Aruba, Curaçao and St. Maarten. The Netherlands would remain part of the Caribbean because it added Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba into the Dutch Constellation, according to Donner.

The Netherlands wants to keep the ties with the other Kingdom partners because it has an interest in maintaining and strengthening the Kingdom. He said it was a "misunderstanding" that especially Aruba, Curaçao and St. Maarten have an interest in continuing the current relations and the Netherlands do not. He explained that the Netherlands have a direct interest in stability and prosperity of the Dutch "public entities" Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba which can serve as a "showcase" for the Dutch and European private sector in its trade relations with South America.

Furthermore, the strategic location of the Dutch Caribbean islands makes them an important partner in the fight against organized crime in the region. Donner said there was much to gain from good and close ties in the Kingdom. A prerequisite, however, is that each partner sees it as its own interest and responsibility to make sure that there is proper governance, healthy government finances, integrity, justice and safety for its people. (Various media)

Curacao – No Plans For Iranian Missile Base in Venezuela

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez – according to German newspaper Die Welt and "World Online"- signed a secret agreement on strategic cooperation with Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad on 19 October 2010, which provides for the construction of an Iranian-Venezuelan military base on Venezuelan soil.

Reportedly, the missile base will be placed in Peninsula de Paraguana, Venezuela, about 120 kilometers from the Colombian border.

A small group of leading engineers from the construction company Khatam al-Anbia (owned by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard) has visited the site already, the German media reported. A spokesperson for the Venezuelan government said that plans for such a military base do not exist. U.S. State Department stated they have no evidence to support this claim and therefore no reason to believe the assertions made in the article are credible. Curacao might be pulled into the discussion because of the U.S. Forward Operating Location presence, the article stated. (La Prensa, Antilliaans Dagblad)

Kingdom – Dutch PVV Party: Independence Is The Only Option

Eric Lucassen, Member of the Dutch Parliament's Second Chamber for the Party for Freedom PVV is convinced that departing from the Dutch Kingdom is the only way for the Dutch Caribbean islands to act as responsible adults and become truly self-reliant. PVV party members often make such bold statements, maintaining a consistent stance about the islands. Lucassen, like his predecessor in Parliament's Permanent Committee for Kingdom Relations Hero Brinkman, is not out to make friends. PVV is and always has been against the constitutional reform process in the Kingdom. PVV feels there is only one solution for the islands and that is out of the Kingdom.

Just last week, during a meeting of the Kingdom Relations Committee, Lucassen called St. Maarten's Prime Minister Sarah Wescot-Williams a "conceited diva" for not showing up at a meeting with the Council for Financial Supervision CFT.

"I can understand that it comes across as rough, but there are also people on the islands who are glad that we are so direct – people who are fed up with corruption, nepotism and bad government finances," he said.

The PVV is not only tough on the islands' political system. "We do that for the Netherlands, but also for the people on the islands," said Lucassen.

PVV has always objected to the decision that The Hague would pay off the national debt of the islands in the restructuring process so the islands could make a fresh start in their new constitutional statuses. That is not because the party is against a better future for the people but because it doesn't trust the local politicians, Lucassen said. (Daily Herald)

Curacao – U.S. Government Sanctions Venezuelan PdVSA Over Iran

Venezuelan state-owned oil major PdVSA has been slapped with sanctions by U.S. authorities over business dealings with Iran. The action brought by the U.S. State Department criticizes the Venezuela-based oil company, and others, for "irresponsibly" supporting Iran's energy industry and helping to facilitate the pariah state in evading U.S. sanctions.

Petrochemical Commercial Co International (PCCI), Middle Eastern player Sepahan Oil and Royal Oyster Group as well as ship owners and shipbrokers made up the list of seven companies hit by the U.S. government with sanctions on Tuesday. The U.S. State Department claimed that PDVSA "has delivered at least two cargoes of reformat to Iran between December 2010 and March 2011, worth approximately \$50 million".

It continued: "The sanctions we have imposed on PDVSA prohibit the company from competing for U.S. government procurement contracts, from securing financing from the Export-Import Bank of the United States, and from obtaining US export licenses".

Crucially, however, the sanctions do not apply to subsidiaries of the oil major and do not stop PDVSA from exporting crude to the U.S.

Spokesperson for the PdVSA-operated Isla Refinery Kenneth Gijsbertha stated he could not exclude that oil products from the Curacao Bullenbaai bunker facilities were shipped to Iran. "I can confirm that ships are going to China from Curacao, but I cannot confirm if ships have gone to Iran. Also, Venezuela controls our International bunkering policy", Gijsbertha said. (Various media)

Aruba – NY Jets Cheerleaders Conquer The Beaches

NY Jets Cheerleaders, known as the Flight Crew, are at Radisson Aruba Resort May 23-28 to shoot their 2012 Calendar. The resort will serve as home base for the famous cheerleading squad and will provide the location for much of the photo shoot. Resort guests will have an opportunity to meet and mingle with the Flight Crew and to watch the photo shoot. (Various media)

Curacao – PM Schotte and Central Bank President Verbally Clash

Central Bank of Curacao and St. Maarten President Emsley Tromp made allegations of wrongdoing against members of the Schotte administration during his meeting with Curacao PM Schotte and during a succeeding radio interview. Tromp told the media he has instructed his attorney to file complaints at the Prosecutor's Office.

Tromp said Finance Minister George “Jorge” Jamaloodin pressured Girobank to sign a contract with Jamaloodin’s security company if Girobank wanted to become the government’s commercial banker. Tromp also claimed that Schotte was making payments with cheques from a gas station owned by Schotte’s next of kin and that Economic Development Minister Nasser El Hakim was asking for a piece of land in exchange for issuing a tax holiday.

During the meeting, Schotte asked Tromp to step down from his position because of accusations that Tromp played a dubious role in acquiring a loan from a commercial bank for two companies of his partner. Tromp refused to leave his position and instead demanded a thorough investigation of the allegations against him. Tromp said he felt blackmailed by Schotte and left the meeting.

Schotte called an urgent press conference after his meeting with Tromp to say the latter had tried to blackmail him with accusations against cabinet members in order to avoid clarifying his own dubious role in a US \$1.7 million loan. The PM said that based on recent reports he had, Tromp arranged the loan for two companies without any collateral from a commercial bank.

Reportedly Tromp cannot be removed from his position because the Central Bank does not have an appointed Board of Commissioners yet, but Schotte has contacted Curacao Governor Goedgedrag in an attempt to find alternative ways to dismiss Tromp. One of the reasons for the meeting was Tromp’s request to appoint a Board of Commissioners as soon as possible. The Central Bank needs the Board to approve monetary policy but Schotte has failed to comply. (Various media)

St. Maarten – Suspect in “Snowflake” Narcotics Case Murdered

Hector Miguel Arrindell (33) was shot and killed in broad daylight Wednesday on the eve of his preliminary hearing, scheduled for today, as the main suspect accused of smuggling 170 kilos of cocaine into St. Maarten. The “Snowflake” case court hearing was scheduled to continue today.

Arrindell, his younger brother and three other suspects had their pre-trial detention lifted on December 1, 2010. The lawyer for the defendants requested the case be dismissed for irregularities. Law enforcement officers reportedly antedated documents in the case file, but instead the lawyer for the defendants was given time to review updated documents from the Prosecutor’s Office by the judge.

The four suspects in St. Maarten were arrested simultaneously with suspects in Curaçao during an intense investigation into drugs-trafficking operations from St. Maarten and Curaçao to Europe last year. The investigation spanned at least seven islands and countries in the region. Joint police and anti-drug agencies from the former Netherlands Antilles, the United States, Colombia, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic and other countries orchestrated the arrests of these men. (Daily Herald)

Curacao – PM Schotte Travels To The Netherlands And Spain

Curacao PM Gerrit Schotte will be out of the country May 27-June 6, 2011, for meetings in the Netherlands and Spain. Schotte will meet with Dutch Queen Beatrix, Dutch PM Mark Rutte and various Dutch cabinet members and members of Dutch parliament to discuss topics of mutual interest. On June 1, Schotte has scheduled a trip to Spain to attend a Tourist Fair and for meetings with Spanish Sol Melia Hotel chain representatives. (Various media)

Dutch Caribbean – 3 PM's Scheduled to Meet in June

The Prime Ministers of St. Maarten, Curaçao and Aruba have scheduled a second Ministerial Consultation meeting in Curaçao in June. The three PM's met in Aruba in December 2010, two months after St. Maarten and Curaçao attained their new constitutional status. "The main goal of the meeting is strengthening cooperation between the Islands, but a date has not officially been announced yet," St. Maarten PM Wescot-Williams said.

Curacao – Clash Between Tromp and Schotte Makes New Headlines

Attorney General Dick Piar spoke to Curaçao Prime Minister Gerrit Schotte on Thursday about allegations of corruption against members of his cabinet by Central Bank President Emsley Tromp. Piar would not discuss the content of the conversation, but indicated that the Prosecutor's Office will investigate the claims and allegations based on a report filed by Tromp and other information that appeared in the media. Piar confirmed that the opposition party PAR parliament faction has also requested an investigation based on the recent accusations.

Banco di Caribe director Fons Simon could not explain how information of a client – Tromp was reportedly involved in a loan of US \$1.7 million without any collateral in 2009 at Banco di Caribe on behalf of his partner – leaked to the media and said an investigation is pending. Tromp stated there is nothing illegal about his loan or the bond loan to utility company Aqualectra arranged by the Central Bank.

Sovereign Party (PS) leader Helmin Wiels stated in a release that Tromp should have filed a complaint with the prosecution right away and not tried to use this information to blackmail and threaten government officials. "Tromp should not accuse the PS of wrongdoing without providing proof," Wiels said.

Dutch Members of Parliament asked for a meeting with Dutch Kingdom Relations Minister Donner concerning the recent incidents in Curacao. In a response, Donner said he needed time to investigate the matter. Schotte and Donner have a scheduled meeting during Schotte's current trip to the Netherlands. (Various media)

St. Maarten – Tourism Authorities Welcome Interest by Choice Hotels

St. Maarten's tourism authorities are welcoming interest by Silver Spring, MD-based Choice Hotels hospitality company to expand its network of Caribbean hotels to the island. The company's Comfort Inn, Comfort Suites, Quality, Sleep Inn, Clarion, Cambria Suites, MainStay Suites, Suburban Extended Stay Hotel, Econo Lodge and Rodeway Inn brands serve guests worldwide.

Director of Tourism Regina LaBega said attracting trusted brands to St. Maarten was very important at a time when there were limited resources to spend on marketing and advertising. "With the Radisson, Sonesta and Westin brands already on island, it would be a welcome addition to introduce Choice Hotels in the rich mix of hotel offerings," LaBega stated.

We anticipate developing a long term relationship with the destination's tourism partners," Jose Salvador Icaza, director of Emerging Markets & Caribbean Franchise Development for Choice Hotels said. (Daily Herald)

Aruba – Valero, WEB, and Gasunie Join in Liquefied Natural Gas Venture

Officials with the San Antonio-based Valero Aruba Refinery, European gas infrastructure company Gasunie and utility company WEB announced they will enter into a joint venture with the goal to operate the refinery and the power plant on liquefied natural gas (LNG) before the end of 2012. The first step is a “floating storage unit” at sea, followed by the construction of a new plant in 2015.

Valero and the Aruba Government signed a memorandum of understanding in December 2010, addressing the delivery of liquefied natural gas to Aruba, which will help reduce utility costs and lower emissions on the island. (Various media)

Kingdom – UNESCO Adds Dutch Slavery Records to World Register

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has announced in Paris that Dutch slavery records and a film collection are to be added to its Memory of the World Register. Among the latest additions is the slavery administration of Middelburg Commercial Company (MCC), as well as that of West Indian Company (WIC). Based in the southwestern province of Zeeland, MCC was involved in the international slave trade in Europe, Africa and the Caribbean.

MCC ships made 300 voyages between 1720 and 1889, more than one-third of them carrying slaves. The archive is considered unique, because it is almost completely intact. It includes records on slave transport, log books and surgeons’ and doctors’ journals. According to UNESCO, the MCC archives are the most complete set of documents on the slave trade, providing “unique” insight into the daily lives of slaves and slave traders. The WIC archives not only provide information on the trade, but also contain a host of information about countries and territories in the 17th and 18th centuries. (Daily Herald)

“The Weekly Press Summary is a compilation of stories running in the Dutch Caribbean press that is intended to alert readers about items of interest to them. There is no interpretation or verification of the facts contained therein.”